

Isaiah 7–8: Part I

Philip W. L. Fong

October 14, 2007

Isaiah 7–8 is the source of the sign of Immanuel as referenced in Matthew 1:23. Yet, before we jump into a messianic reading of the text, we should first listen to the message of Isaiah in his own historical context. This is the task to which we now turn.

[7:1–2]

- The historical background of this passage is given in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28.
- Aram is a region in central Syria, with her capital city at Damascus. Ephraim is one of the most prominent regions/tribes of Israel. It is frequently used as a synonym for the Northern Kingdom.
- Since the division of the Kingdom, Judah had been inferior to her Northern sister in terms of both economic and military power. Occasional military conflicts between Israel and Judah almost always brought the latter to humiliation. Opportunism caused Ahaz to adopt a pro-Assyrian foreign policy, hoping to thereby reassert the dominance of the Davidic throne over the tribes of Israel. This was the political backdrop against which the Syro-Ephriamite coalition arose (2 Kings 16:1–6; 2 Chronicles 28:1–15). Thus it was in the midst of conflict and retaliation, calculation and conspiracy, bribery and betrayal, that the first public phase of Isaiah’s ministry unfolded.
- The central emotion of this passage is highlighted in v. 2 — *fear*, the fear of total annihilation.

[3–6]

- vv. 5–6 highlight the intention of Rezin and Pekah — to usurp the throne of Ahaz, and place on it a puppet of their choice (Tabeel literally means “good for nothing”).
- v. 3: Ahaz was examining the sole water supply of Jerusalem when he was approached by Isaiah. In the eve of a siege, Ahaz demonstrated strategic thinking. We are looking at a competent king who knows what he is doing.
- v. 4: God’s counsel is that Ahaz should “keep calm and don’t be afraid.” Aram and Israel are but “smoldering stubs of firewood”. The smoke is a sign that the firewood is near the end of its usefulness.

- Of particular interest is that Isaiah was instructed by God to bring along his son, Shear-Jashub (v. 3). The name literally means “a remnant will return.” The child is obviously named as a symbolic testimony to the hope of Isaiah as recorded in v. 6:13. Explicitly requesting that this son be present in the meeting, God probably wanted to remind Ahaz of His ultimate plan — Judah would not face complete annihilation, no matter how real the threat of Aram and Israel appeared.

[7–9]

- The reiteration of God’s consolation is rendered in poetic form. The reader is invited to ask: “Who is the head of Jerusalem?”
- The core counsel is: “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” Ahaz was called to trust in God in the eve of battle. Failure to do so would cost Ahaz everything. At this point, the reader should ask: exactly in what way should Ahaz exercise his trust?

[10–17]

- Ahaz was invited by God to ask for a sign (v. 11). In the prophetic books, a sign is a visible guarantee, usually in the form of special or even miraculous events, of a prophecy yet to be fulfilled (e.g., 1 Samuel 2:34; 10:1–8). The realization of the sign is not the fulfillment of the prophecy, but rather a pointer to the fulfillment of the prophecy.
- The seemingly pious response of Ahaz (v. 12 is an allusion to Deuteronomy 6:16) evoked a decisively negative judgment from the prophet (v. 13). (The severity of the judgment is evident from Isaiah’s shift from “your God” (v. 10) to “my God.”) Why?
- The hypocrisy of Ahaz is revealed in 2 Kings 16:7–9 (see also 2 Chronicles 28:16). He allied with the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser, hoping that, by turning Judah into a submissive servant of Assyria, the empire would deliver him from the hands of Rezin and Pekah. Consequently, the response of Ahaz to the invitation of Isaiah was not one of piety, but rather that of choosing Assyria over Yahweh as the object of trust. This is a fulfillment of the prophecy of hardening in Ch. 6. From this day on, the fortune of the house of David would be decisively changed.
- Isaiah announced a sign to Ahaz, the sign of Immanuel (v. 14). Immanuel literally means “God is with us.” This verse has generated a great deal of scholarly debates. The crux of the difficulty is twofold. First, the traditional messianic reading of the sign, based on Luke’s report of virgin birth, is completely out of the historical context of Ch. 7. Second, the word “virgin” in its original language means “a young woman of marriageable age.” Yet, the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek translation of the Old Testament as quoted by Matthew) renders the word “virgin”, thereby introducing retrospectively a connotation of virginity not necessarily intended by Isaiah. In this course, we will adopt the following reading. As part of the biblical canon, Luke offers authoritative witness to the virgin birth of Jesus. We do not need Isaiah 7 to support the authenticity of this miracle. I deem the emphasis of Isaiah 7:14 to be the imminence of the Immanuel sign, rather than the virginity of the mother. Therefore, we will read the word as “maiden” rather than “virgin”. As we shall see, there is another route, namely, Isaiah 8, by which the sign is transformed into a messianic one. We believe this reading honors both the historical and canonical integrity of the text.

- vv. 15–17 explain two seemingly opposite senses of Immanuel.
- On the one hand, Immanuel is a sign of the eventual resolution of the Syro-Ephraimite threat (vv. 15–16). What is spoken of here is that before the child is grown to a certain age, the present threat will be resolved. Which age, however, is not absolutely certain. One possible reading is that Isaiah was speaking of the age of moral accountability, and thus putting the intended age to 12–20. This would mean Isaiah was referring to the fall of Samaria (2 Kings 17:3–6). Another possible reading is to take 8:4 as a reference point, and thus putting the intended age to some three years. This would mean Isaiah was referring to the fall of Damascus (2 Kings 16:9) and the invasion of Israel by Assyria. .

Notice that this could have been the outcome even if Ahaz did not call for the help of Tiglath-Pileser. The Assyrian king would not have sat still when Aram and Israel conspired against him. That was why Isaiah asked Ahaz to “keep calm and don’t be afraid”, and why Isaiah asserted that “it will not take place, it will not happen.”

- On the other hand, the sign is also a threat. By enlisting the help of Assyria, God would employ the empire to judge Judah (v. 17). The subsequent turn of events confirmed this threat. 2 Chronicles 28:20–21 testify to the vanity of allying with Assyria:

Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came to him, but he gave him trouble instead of help. Ahaz took some of the things from the temple of the Lord and from the royal palace and from the princes and presented them to the king of Assyria, but that did not help him.

Reflections.

- Why was God so offended when a calculating king sought the help of the Assyrian empire? What was done by Ahaz appeared to be quite human. Does God expect one to stand still and wait for annihilation instead of giving oneself a fighting chance?
- It turns out the issue is not as simple as it looks. Reading 2 Kings 16:10–18 allows us to have a much better appreciation of what was actually at stake. As Ahaz was summoned by Tiglath-Pileser to the captured city of Damascus to formalize their alliance, Ahaz ended up bringing back to Judah the religion of Assyria. What was at stake was Judah’s loyalty to God. Trusting Assyria ultimately means rejecting God. Trusting Assyria means exchanging loyalty to God for survival.
- As we learn to be a servant of God, as we learn to serve God by engaging the world, we must remember that it is ever tempting for us to trust socio-political forces and human conspiracies rather than living a life of faithfulness and integrity in front of God. A lot of times, Ahaz’s choice will be presented to us, in forms so subtle that it can barely be recognized: Would you rather survive and thrive, or would you be loyal to God?
- The sign of Immanuel serves to remind us that God is ever among us as the Holy One of Israel, the one who holds us accountable to our pledge of loyalty, and yet promises protection at times of trial.